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## ART. VIII. — CRITICAL NOTICES.

1. — *Poems on Man, in his various Aspects under the American Republic*. By CORNELIUS MATHEWS, Author of the "Motley Book," "Behemoth," "Puffer Hopkins," &c. New York : Wiley and Putnam. 1843. 16mo. pp. 112.

MR. MATHEWS is more favorably known to the literary public as the strenuous advocate of an international copyright law, than as an author. Yet some of his earlier writings were not without merit. His story called "Behemoth" showed uncommon imagination, and considerable power of style. It embodied a striking aboriginal tradition, and was told in manly, nervous, and unaffected language. It was a work which indicated something like genius, and gave good promise of better things to come; but each succeeding work has, by a regular gradation, sunk below its predecessor, exactly reversing the ordinary course of young and gifted authors. The art of sinking on a great scale was never more skilfully practised. With good and even high aims, Mr. Mathews has shown a marvellous skill in failing, each failure being more complete than the last. His comedy of "The Politicians" is "the most lamentable comedy"; and the reader exclaims, with Hippolyta, "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard." The career of Puffer Hopkins is an elaborately bad imitation of Dickens; and must be ranked in fiction where "The Politicians" stands in the drama. It aims at being comical, and satirical upon the times. The author studies hard to portray the motley characters which move before the observer in a large city; but he has not enough of the vision and the faculty divine, to make them more than melancholy ghosts of what they profess to be. The attempts at humor are inexpressibly dismal; the burlesque overpowers the most determined reader, by its leaden dulness. The style is ingeniously tasteless and feeble. He who has read it through can do or dare any thing.

How is it, that a young man of talent can perpetrate such literary enormities? The question can only be answered by stating the peculiarities of style, which these works manifest. Mr. Mathews suffers from several erroneous opinions. He seems to think, that literary elegance consists in the very qualities which make elegance impossible. Simplicity and directness of language he abominates. When he has an idea to express, he aims, apparently, to convert it into a riddle, by inventing the most

forced, unnatural, and distorted expressions. If the thing can be obscured, he is sure to obscure it. He seems to say to the reader, "Can you guess? do you give it up?" But then, less obliging than the maker of charades, he leaves the puzzled victim without an explanation at last. He studies a singularity of phrase at once crabbed and finical, and overloads his pages with far-fetched epithets, that are at once harsh and unmeaning. He seems to have been told, that he has wit and humor, and — strange delusion — to believe it. He writes as if he imagined that he possessed the inventive power; — never was a greater mistake. These qualities and these mistakes make his prose writings unreadable and intolerable, — at least, all the later ones. But when to the charms of his ordinary style are added the attractions of verse, then the sense aches with the combined and heightened beauties. The present volume exaggerates all his literary vices. The plan of these poems is very well; if executed with taste and power, the volume would have been interesting. As it is, we have here and there a good line, a striking figure, or a bold expression. But most of the poems are deformed by harshness of versification, feebleness of thought, and every species of bad writing. Compounded words, never seen before, and impossible to be pronounced, epithets detailed on service for which they are wholly unfit, figures that illustrate nothing but their own absurdity, and rhymes that any common book would die of, astonish the reader on every page. Had the poet purposely aimed to twist the English language into every conceivable form of awkwardness, had he designed to illustrate, for the use of beginners, every possible defect and every positive fault of diction, his success in accomplishing the object could not have been more complete. We say these things with regret, because, as was intimated before, we regard the aims of Mr. Mathews, on several matters of importance, with respect, and we think he has the power to make valuable contributions to our literature. But he will never do so without rejecting *all* his present notions of fine writing, unlearning all the bad lessons he has been taught, and returning to nature, simplicity, and truth.

We had marked many characteristic passages in the present volume, to illustrate the observations we have felt called on to make. But we have space only for a few lines. In the first poem, besides many other absurdities of thought as well as expression, occurs this line :

"Strides he the globe, or *canvass-tents* the sea."

Who ever heard of the verb to *canvass-tent*? To *canvass-back* the sea would be much more rational.

In the second poem we find this luminous line :

“ *Clear as the clear, round midnight at its full,*”

which must be very clear indeed.

What can be the meaning of the following words in the “Teacher” ?

“Whose eyes cry light through all its dawning void.”

Again, in the “Farmer” :

“Fierce revolutions rush in *wild-orbed* haste.”

In the “Mechanic,” the following very intelligible direction is given to the architect :

“In the first Builder’s gracious spirit work,  
Through hall, through enginery, and *temples meek,*  
*In grandeur towered, or lapsing, beauty-sleek,*  
Let order and creative fitness shine.”

In the “Merchant,” the poet affirms :

“Undimmed the man should through the trader shine,  
And show the soul *unbabied* by his craft.”

This can only mean, that the soul of the trader ought not to be supplied with babies by his craft.

The “Sculptor” ends with this prediction :

“And up shall spring through all the *broad-set* land,  
The *fair while* people of thy love unnumbered.”

In the “Journalist,” we find the following *directions to the printer* :

“Hell not the quiet of a Chosen Land,  
Thou grimy man over thine engine bending.”

*Hell*, as a common noun, is a sufficiently uncomfortable idea ; but when converted into an active verb, it becomes positively alarming.

The poet thus advises “The Masses” :

“In vast assemblies calm, let order rule,  
And every shout a cadence owning,  
Make musical the vexed wind’s moaning,  
*And be as little children at a singing school.’*”

And the “Reformer” is told to

“Seize by its horns the shaggy Past,  
Full of uncleanness.”